

# Barely Decent

By Kent Patterson

When the snooze alarm rang, Celeste tried to roll over to turn it off, but she couldn't because her long skirts tangled up in the sheets and resisted every movement. That snapped her awake. When she had gone to bed last night, she had worn nothing but the "Love Whispers," a nightie she'd designed specifically not to resist anything. She threw back the covers.

She was wearing a long, gray-green granny dress which reached from her chin to her ankles. The sheets were in rags. She leaped out of bed and looked in her full-length mirror. The dress was utterly shapeless. All that dieting and aerobicise to keep her willowy figure willowy, and suddenly she looked like a deflated blimp. First time in her life she'd ever woken up wearing more than when she'd gone to bed.

It had to be a ghastly dream. Maybe last night she'd worked too late in her rock garden. Wildly, she looked around the bedroom. The mirror, her antique oak dresser, her cosmetic bottles — everything was exactly in place. Even the faint aroma of L'Amour du Demi Monde perfume was reassuring.

Ted! A practical joke! He'd been gone to work for two hours, but maybe he'd sneaked this hideous thing on her — no. Why a joke if he wasn't around to laugh? Besides, she couldn't imagine Ted ever sneaking clothes *on* to a girl.

The phone rang. It was Hermione, her secretary at the Barely Decent Design Studio, and she sounded as hysterical as Celeste felt.

"Turn your TV to the Reverend Theron's Modest Majority Show, Channel 6!" Hermione screamed.

"Hermione! I'm not interested in politics just now. You can't guess what horrible thing happened —" Celeste said.

"You woke up in a granny dress like lots of other women all over town. All of them wearing our Love Whispers line. Turn on the Reverend Theron's Modest Majority show." The phone went silent.

Worse and worse. As she turned on the TV, Celeste stripped off the shapeless dress, only to discover she was wearing still more shapeless underwear. As a professional designer of the finest in lingerie, she felt insulted. This stuff was cut to a pattern not worn by any self-respecting woman since the days of the Crusades. She stripped it off, too. It wasn't easy.

"... worse than harlots, are those who cater to harlotry, who revel in casting a scum of fashion over the rotting flesh of whoredom," bellowed the Reverend Theron. His round oily face filled the TV screen. Sweat beads on his forehead glittered in the studio lights. A telephone number appeared on the screen over his chin. In the background, a huge "Reverend Theron for President" poster reminded the ungodly that the good Reverend's power was more than merely spiritual.

He held up the Barely Decent company logo. Celeste drew in her breath sharply. That slime ball. His Modest Majority had already driven her spring line of micro-teddies virtually underground.

Now he was attacking her, or the company she had created and nurtured, which amounted to the same thing.

"It's filth in the name of fashion," shouted the Reverend Theron. "A modest America is a moral America. Ah, brothers and sisters, listen to the ads for the company that calls itself Barely Decent, which, let me tell you, is the only honest line this company gives. Imagine your young daughters, tender in years, and tender in impressions, listening to this."

He read from the Barely Decent catalog. "'Eyes right, and that right is you. Catch every eye on the beach with swimsuits by Barely Decent.' Brothers, can you imagine a more clever trap for the vanity and frailty of a young woman? But there's worse. Much worse." He held up a solemn hand and read. "The Love Whispers No-nightie Nightie. If this fabric could whisper, it would whisper of love. You slip it on. He'll slip it off."

Anger surged through Celeste. She'd written that ad herself, and agonized over every word. She reached for the knob to snap the Reverend Theron off, but then noticed her arm. There was a long sleeve creeping down her wrist. That awful underwear tightened around her waist.

The hideous dress was growing back in place! Anger turned to fear. Celeste clutched at the dress, ripping off pieces and flinging them to the floor. She sprinted into her home studio and snatched up her shears, slashing at the fabric which crept over her body like grass covering a grave.

The dress kept growing back. She looked closely at where the shears had slashed through the skirt. She had to be crazy. But even as she watched, the cloth grew.

"But God will not be mocked!" The Reverend Theron's sermon echoed through Celeste's panic like a warning bell. "And, through the miracles of modern science, God has sent the littlest and humblest of his creatures to cover the naked from the lusting eye of the unregenerate. "

Suddenly Celeste knew that somehow this horrid dress was Theron's fault. She ran back into the bedroom. Sure enough, a woman was modeling exactly the same dress. She carried a glowing laser poster advertising the Modest Majority Miss Christian America Pageant to be held on the Reverend's show. Just one week before elections, Celeste noticed.

"Consider the silkworm, how mighty in spirit," said the Reverend. The screen switched to a scene of silkworms spinning cocoons. "Now, praise God, we have distilled the essence of the silkworm into a machine so tiny it cannot be seen. Amen. But this worm is not merely a creature of chance. For each and every one of these tiny machines has a computer programmed to enforce modesty, praise the Lord."

The audience praised. Celeste stood dumbfounded.

"And now, we stand upon a mountain top and lift up our voices to all the world. God will not be mocked by the indecent or the 'Barely Decent.'" Behind the Reverend, a mass chorus launched into *Glory, Glory*. The music swelled, the camera moved in until the entire screen showed only his face and the inevitable phone number.

"That hypocrite. That, that . . ."

None of the words of conventional abuse seemed adequate. Finally Celeste grabbed the phone and got Hermione on her private line. "Things are crazy here," Hermione whimpered. "Customers are yelling, and the phone's just coming off the hook, and —"

"Shut up, Hermione. Stop sniveling. Find me someone who knows something about those damned artificial silkworms. Make sure they're not connected to the Reverend Theron. I'm calling my lawyer." She paused. "Load for bear, because we're going preacher hunting."

Celeste called her lawyer, fuming as she went through the usual obstacle course of receptionists. The lawyer promised to seek an injunction.

"Damn it, Suzanne," Celeste snapped. "An injunction? You're talking months. By then Barely Decent will be history. "

"Nevertheless — "

Celeste hung up.

While waiting for Hermione's phone call, Celeste examined her dress. Years of experience with fabrics had not prepared her for this one. It was slick, coarse, and stiff. Calling it silk was obviously one of the Reverend's little exaggerations. The fabric grew, weaving itself as from an invisible loom. Not colorfast. She rubbed some of it between sheets of tissue paper. The paper turned gray.

She imagined those tiny computerized factories working away, creating thread and breeding like rabbits. She wondered what they ate. Even if they weren't living creatures, they would have to consume something.

At last Hermione called, giving her the address of an expert on nano-synthesis.

Celeste stepped outside. Her dress swirled after her. She stared at the obscene thing. It was the very antithesis of everything Celeste stood for in the world of design. Worse. This dress denied her own body. It hid her as if she were something to be smuggled through customs. It was an invasion, a sort of anti-sexual rape.

She half expected the scientist to be an absentminded elderly gentlemen with a long beard and a white coat. Robert Whicher turned out to be thirty, with a hand-knit sweater and off-white slacks that stopped just short of working, fashion-wise. She looked up and down his frame with a professional eye. Definitely a fixer-upper.

After two hours of testing, he was just as discouraging as any old bearded duffer could have been.

"I'll do my very best to help you," he said. "After all, the good Reverend and his anti-science crusades aren't good for my profession, either. But I don't know how much I can do," he said. "It's not that I don't know what's going on. Theron didn't invent these things; he bought them. But the programming has been changed. These bugs are intelligent, at least in a limited sort of way. True, all they know is making granny dresses, but that they do know. You don't have to be Einstein to make a granny dress."

"How'd they get on my nightgown'?"

"Well, since they're all over town, I'd say someone just walked into the stores and sprinkled the stock. Wouldn't take much. A single drop would infect lots of fabric."

"There's not much fabric in Love Whispers." She thought for a few seconds.

"Why can't I wash them off'?"

"Too small. You can wash off some of the actual workers. But a few breeders will always remain in the pores of your skin. They breed new ones in minutes. You can't keep washing all the time."

"So how about some chemical to poison them?"

"A good possibility. Sulfuric acid would do nicely, except of course it wouldn't do much good for your complexion."

"Starve them?"

"Too risky. They are programmed to consume oxygen, carbon, hydrogen, silicon directly, atom by atom. Plenty of that stuff around. But if they can't get it from the atmosphere, dust, other cloth, and the like, they might take it from your skin."

“Eat my skin? To make this abomination?” She raised the long skirt. “Horrible!”  
 “Yes, horrible. But incredible technology.” He saw the look on her face. “Oh, sorry.”  
 Celeste grabbed her purse and stormed out.

She strode down the street with the long skirt swinging from her waist. At newsstands, Reverend Theron’s oily face was on nearly every magazine cover. Headlines screamed “Theron Inches Ahead: Polls Show 2 Percent Lead Building.”

My God, Celeste thought. The man who hates me and hates my business may become President of the United States. I’m becoming an oppressed minority in my own country, and my chosen profession will be outlawed.

When she got to the Barely Decent main office, she was appalled.

“It’s a madhouse.” Hermione cried. “Every model we have is in a granny dress. There’s a thousand women calling us.”

“Tell them to call the Rev.”

“Every distributor we’ve got is canceling orders.”

Celeste’s blood ran cold. “How bad is it?”

“We won’t sell so much as a pair of undies.”

Dazed, Celeste leaned against the wall. Just twenty-four hours ago, the fall line was her greatest hit ever. With one touch of his magic wand, the Rev turned a booming young fashion house into a financial Sahara.

No sense staying in the disaster area. She hailed a cab and went home.

Reporters! The lawn was covered with them. Even her carefully raked Japanese rock garden was being trampled into nothingness.

No way out of it. Thank God Ted had come home.

“How does it feel to be called ‘harlot’ and ‘strumpet’?” shouted a woman from Christ First! Network, holding a mini-cam in her face.

“Do you feel God’s wrath’?” shouted a man from One Way Open Bible Cable.

In the mass, Celeste saw Wayne Nelson from Connections Network. She knew she could trust him to show some objectivity.

“I will make only one statement.” She looked directly into Wayne’s face, ignoring the others. “I have no quarrel with any woman who chooses of her own free will to wear one of these things. She knows what she is hiding. But I am not ashamed of my sex, my body, or my womanhood.”

She thought that sounded rather noble.

“I am sexual, I am not a sex object. I play many roles. So does every human being. You need to be something more than a doctor or a lawyer,” Through the window, she could see Ted with his hand on the front doorknob. Great. A quick escape. “There are times when even an accountant should be Barely Decent. And hang the so-called Reverend Theron.”

She sprinted for the door, Ted opened it, she rushed through and slammed it behind her, catching her long skirts. She slipped out of the dress. it wasn’t as if she couldn’t get another.

“Ted, they’re killing me.”

With his balding head, stooped posture, and his utter refusal to wear anything not guaranteed to be twenty years out of style, Ted was not the male ideal pictured in the Barely Decent catalog. But right now he’d never looked so good.

She buried her face against his shoulder. He hugged her, made “there, there” noises, and fondled her bottom. At least she thought he fondled her bottom. With her underwear, she couldn’t be sure.

It took three stiff drinks and an excellent cry before she felt anything like a human being. Ted, for once, was totally supportive.

“Your scientist friend called. He said he’d be working night and day to help.”

“Ted, my whole fall line is gone. I can’t pay him. I’ll be lucky to pay Hermione and studio rent.”

“I’ll pay him.” He put his hand under her chin and lifted her face. “Hon, this is *our* battle. If the Rev calls you a whore, what is he calling the man who sleeps with you? We’ll make him eat those words, or neither of us will ever be able to face ourselves again.”

Five o’clock was the trial by TV. Wayne Nelson was exactly as she expected, showing her as well as he could .

But she had fatally underestimated the unscrupulousness of the Rev’s media machine. She’d made a monster mistake in speaking at all.

“Hang the so-called Reverend Theron,” she saw herself saying, her face on the screen shaded so that she looked like Jack the Ripper’s meaner sister. “Even accountants should be Barely Decent.”

She remembered something she’d heard Wayne Nelson say. Direct quotes can be the cruelest form of lying. Now she knew what he meant.

“That damned Theron’s out to ruin me, Ted.” she said. “And he’s doing it.”

Ted made an inarticulate noise, but she wasn’t listening anyway.

“He’s not going to let me work anymore.” A tear slid down one cheek. “It’s all I ever wanted to do. Even when I was a little girl, all the other girls used to babble about becoming physicists and lawyers, but what I wanted to do was to make beautiful clothes, I used to dress up my kitten, when I could make him hold still.”

The drinks were coming home. “And now I’m trapped in this, this tent.” She grabbed her dress, pulling at the fabric.

That night Ted tried to make love to her. It was hideous. Celeste thought of herself as an especially sexy woman, but she simply could not be rushed. She needed time, time to be petted and fondled. She needed soft fabric against her skin, and Ted’s strong, warm hands unwrapping her like the gift of her love was a precious thing. But the dress and the underwear kept coming back. There was no time. She pitied those poor Victorian women with all their pounds of skirts and petticoats. No wonder they’d thought of sex as a time to close your eyes and think of England.

That hideous dress ruined everything. Feeling hot, sweaty, simultaneously aroused and disgusted, she left the bed and locked herself into her design studio. She stared out the window until the first hint of dawn touched the eastern sky. The Reverend had destroyed her business. her profession, and now he was ruining her relationship with Ted,

There was only one thing left to do. However much it hurt, she would have to go see the Reverend Theron. She smiled bitterly. What fabric would a designer choose for a white flag?

“You utterly mistake our position, Miss Celeste,” said the Reverend Theron. Celeste let the “Miss” pass. He lolled behind his desk, a monster of exotic woods with an inlaid thin gold cross. Celeste couldn’t guess how much the desk cost, but she did know clothes. The designer blue suit he wore would support a family of four for six months. “I *personally* have nothing against you. He smiled. He always smiled. “But *this*,” he held up one meaty hand. Diamonds flashed from rings on every finger, “is merely a poor instrument in the hands of God. I can do nothing but that which God wills. Everything I say is the word of God.”



Celeste suppressed an intense desire to vomit on the Rev's handmade Oriental rug. "So you will do nothing for me?"

"Ah, my staff tells me your company has contributed very heavily to my presidential opponent."

So that's it, thought Celeste. The bastard must have spies at every keyhole. "If I were to give a very large contribution to your party?"

"God's party."

"God's party, then. Do you feel perhaps you might stop this attack on me?"

"God's always forgiving the repentant sinner. Provided he's genuinely sincere."

"How sincere would I have to be?"

The smile became sultry.

"Do you know of the biblical tithe, Miss Celeste."

"What! Ten percent of all I make?"

"Before taxes."

"But my profit margin's not that high. I only . . ." Celeste's voice trailed off as the Reverend Theron heaved his bulk from behind his desk. Mounds of fat under his expensive suit rolled like waves on a water bed. From his TV show, Celeste would never have guessed he was so fat. Talk about a scum of fashion on vile flesh.

"You see, Miss, there are more ways to prove sincerity than with money." He came around the desk toward her, his diamonds flickering like marker lights. "This tiny device" — he held out a remote controller — "has a special code which controls the silkworms in your dress. I can turn them off this easily." He pressed a button. As if it were suddenly rotten, the fabric of her dress dropped off.

Then her bra went the way of her dress. For the first time in days, her breasts were bare.

"You are beautiful," the Rev smirked. "I can hate the sin but love the sinner," He clutched at her underpants.

Just as they had taught in her women's self-defense class, she brought her hand up to hit at his crotch. He blocked her hand, but he did back off.

Celeste jumped up and sprinted for the door, trailing bits of the last fragments of her clothes as she ran.

"You can't run away from the wrath of God," the Rev bellowed. He pointed the remote at her and pressed the button. She ran through the door and slammed it behind her. The receptionist in the outer office hardly looked up. She's used to naked women running from the Rev's office, Celeste thought. What an oily, horny, hypocrite that scum sucker is. Far better an honest lecher than a pretended saint.

It took Celeste twenty minutes to find her way through the Reverend's mansion and back to the street. By that time, her granny dress was back in all its drabness. As a fashion designer, she would have been far less embarrassed to have walked down the street nude.

When she got home Robert Whicher, the scientist, and Ted were in a council of war. She joined in, telling Whicher about the remote.

"Yeah. I know the type. Not much different than what you've got on your TV. Only with some kind of special entry code."

"Couldn't we make one?" Ted asked.

"Buy one for a few bucks. But we don't know the code number."

"Couldn't we break the code?"

"Not in just one lifetime."

Dejectedly, Celeste rubbed the fabric of her skirt between her fingers.

"This garbage isn't really silk."

"Yes, the Rev lies when the truth would sound better. Chemically, it's plastic. That whole design is based on one that was designed to spin cheap plastic optical fibers. Basically, all his gang of tech school dropouts did was take one gadget that created optic fibers, tie it on the back of another one that hides in human skin pores, and patch up the programming. Shit poor kludge of a job, if you ask me."

"Good enough, though. What I don't understand is where the material to make the cloth comes from," said Ted.

"From the air, mostly. The plastic is two-thirds oxygen by weight. Then it eats other cloths. That's what happened to your bedsheets. I don't know where it gets the silicon." He looked at Celeste. "You ever play in the sand?"

"No, of course not." She thought for a second. "Yes! My Japanese rock garden!"

"OK. It only needs a few grains of silicon; you probably, track that much into the house. I bet that's why it grows so fast on you. With the other women, it has to wait until it gets enough silicon from household dust and dirt."

"Why is it colored?" She held up her stained fingers, "Where did this dye come from, and why is it always gray-green?"

"It isn't dye. It's a reflective powder."

"What's that?"

"Optical plastic is so transparent that it's hard to see. Makes it a bitch to work with. So you spray it with some goop to make it reflect light. Regular dyes won't stick, so the goop's got to be a superfine powder which sticks by molecular attraction. Grind it to fit a certain light wave, you get that color. That's why all these dresses are gray-green. This particular powder reflects light waves somewhere in the yellow-green range around 500 nanometers. All other frequencies of light go right on through. Amazing stuff."

After Robert left, Ted made drinks and sat unsociably far across the room. She knew he didn't mean to snub her, but to his mind she'd rejected him. Not from her own choice, but she had. There was a wall growing between them. In spite of all she could do, every day it grew a little thicker. She missed the sex, but much more she missed the touching, the fondling, and the cuddling. She smiled bitterly. She'd give a million for one of Ted's patented back massages. They only started with the back.

Making up her mind, she got up and went to him, hugging him, sitting on his lap. He responded with the awkwardness of a junior high school boy expecting a slapped face. Through all the thickness of heavy cloth, his hands didn't feel like hands. There was no warmth in them. Finally, she got up and went to her design studio. He made no effort to follow her.

A plastic dress? It was an iron dress, a walking prison.

At seven, Celeste turned on the Reverend Theron's Modest Majority show. An act of sheer masochism, she thought, but she couldn't tear her eyes away. Fifty young women in gray-green granny dresses exactly like hers sang, danced, and in general tried their best to make it look like wearing the clothing equivalent of Alcatraz prison was the best thing since skin.

"Hallelujah, brothers and sisters," the Rev shouted, bouncing out from behind the wings and up to his natural place at the front of the stage. He'd dropped the expensive suit and was wearing a

gray-green plastic suit. But then he had the controller, Celeste thought. The crowd roared approval and gave a standing ovation as he modeled the suit.

"A modest America is a moral America," he bellowed, as the chorus piped up "Onward Christian Soldiers." "A spotlight picked him out of the crowd. "And if you think you're seeing something tonight, tune in tomorrow and see what true beauty is really all about at our Miss Christian America Pageant." Squealing, and jumping, the young women in the background went into a frenzy. Powerful spotlights played over them.

Celeste sat with her mouth open. She remembered a demonstration on color she'd seen at design school. There was the solution right in front of her eyes.

"Ted, Ted," she ran shouting into his room. "Get downtown immediately and get three tickets to the Miss Christian America Beauty Pageant." He looked at her as if she had lost her mind. "Now! I'll explain later." He left. Then she dialed Robert.

The Modest Majority auditorium was packed. To one side of the stage, a massive pipe organ and a five hundred member choir blasted out "Power in the Blood." God's Solid Gold Hits, Celeste thought. The crowd pressed forward inches at a time. Fully half of the women and many of the men were dressed in gray-green. So much the better, thought Celeste. Three more people in gray-green will be invisible. She squeezed Ted's hand. "Be careful, hon. Security's got to be tight."

"Thanks. I can't believe I'm sneaking around a Christian beauty pageant. "

"No sweat." Robert said. "I've got friends in low places. I know half the techies working here. Got your pager, Celeste?"

"Of course. I'd rather have one of Theron's remotes."

"If this works, he'll be glad to give you one. Anyway, just press the red button when you want to buzz me and Ted for action. Come on, Ted. We've got to get upstairs while my man is still on duty."

Celeste watched them go. Dressed in gray-green, it was astonishing how rapidly they melted into the gray-green crowd. Taking her seat, she placed her purse demurely on her lap, and pretended to be engrossed in the music, which, to tell the truth, had become so loud as to be impossible to ignore.

"Hallelujah, brothers and sisters!" The Rev bounced about in his gray-green suit. The already deafening music swelled to a new high and switched suddenly to the "Star Spangled Banner." Everyone stood. When everyone sat, Celeste opened her purse and put her hand on the tiny pager. She would wait for exactly the right moment.

The next thirty minutes were an assault on the senses such as Celeste hadn't seen since her teeny rock concert years. Speakers bigger than bathtubs blasted the crowd. Celeste could feel the vibrations tugging at her skirt. You couldn't possibly not listen. No one stirred. Not one child giggled or whispered. At that sound level, even shouting would have made no difference. Huge colored letters, thrown on the dome ceiling with lasers, spelled out campaign slogans and the Reverend's name.

No doubt the star of the show was the Reverend Theron. He bellowed, he shouted, cried, whispered, roared. He cavorted, he jumped, he sprinted, herding the fifty young women contestants as if they were sheep. Celeste was flabbergasted that a man of his age and bulk could exert so much energy.

A dozen times she nearly punched the button. But things were never quite right.

Now the beauty contestants each had her brief moment in the sun. One by one, they minced up



to the microphone, simpered a few words about true beauty abiding with Jesus, and took their place back in the line. When the fiftieth and last had her say, the entire line started jumping and bouncing like so much popcorn.

“Hallelujah!” Rev Theron shouted, throwing his arms into the air and making a most astonishing leap. He came down with a thud, his knees bending in preparation for a yet more astonishing leap.

Celeste pressed the button. Instantly a pinkish spotlight caught the Reverend and he was dressed only in a blue tie and black shoes.

“Hallelujah!” Arms thrown into the sky, the Reverend leaped. Vast waves of fat rolled down his chest and stomach. When he came down, his stomach looked like a surfer’s paradise.

As one person, the crowd caught its breath. More spotlights came on. Now the fifty young women, wearing only high heels and fake diamond tiaras, jumped and kicked in line with all the gifts the good Lord gave them on honest display.

With one final wail from the pipe organ, the music failed. Blinded by the powerful spotlights and not realizing their situation, the Reverend and the Modest Majority contestants tried in the finest traditions of show biz to make the show go on. It did. The audience booed and whistled. A seat cushion sailed through the air and landed on stage, followed by a blizzard of more.

More pinkish lights came on. A scream in the audience notified everyone that not all the show was on stage. Like a sudden wind through a wheat field, panic surged through the crowd. Stalwart Christians who had hardly looked at their own bodies for ten years, much less any one else’s, suddenly found themselves appearing in only that which the Lord had provided. They ran from the knowledge as if from a fire, piling up at the exits in one vast shoving, screaming, mass of humanity.

In the general confusion, Celeste dropped the pager into a trash can.

“You realize you cost me the election,” said the Reverend, sitting behind his gold cross desk. “I’ve lost near forty points in the polls.” It had been three days. Judging by his appearance, it might have been ten years. His face was gray and his eyes wandered. “You’ve humiliated me in front of an audience of 20,000,000 Christians. You’ve made my name a hiss and a byword among the chosen.”

“It stinks among the unchosen, too,” said Celeste. This time she’d brought Ted with her.

“What do you want?”

“Three things. First, we want the codes to get rid of these damned dresses once and for all. Second, damages for my business. Third, we want you off our backs permanently. Not another word about me, or my business.”

“Out of our lives,” said Ted.

“And if I don’t?”

“All we did is take a little light filter set to block one set of light frequencies. “ Celeste pulled a disk of greenish plastic from her purse. “Block the one frequency which causes the color, all the others go right through. These filters are cheap and easy to make. So. First, we’re selling our little light filter to anyone who can buy it. Imagine what your Modest Majority ladies will think when any casual stranger with a flashlight can look right through their clothes.”

“We’re giving a 50 percent discount to dirty-minded small boys,” Ted put in.

“Second. we know you’ve managed to squelch all recordings of the film on your own networks. But we had Wayne Nelson attend, and he made one for the secular networks. Roll ’em, Ted.”

Ted put a minivid on the gold cross desk and pressed PLAY. “We call this shot ‘lift up your arms to the Lord.’”

The Reverend turned his head away.

“Hey, you’re going to miss your close-ups,” Ted said.

“Here.” The Rev turned, unlocked a drawer to his desk, and tossed over the remote. “Here’s the control. The codes are on the inside of the back cover. For the damage to your business, send me the bill. And now,” he thundered with a touch of the old spark, “get out of my office. May God see you in the lowest pit of Hell.”

Was there anything nicer than a long hot shower, thought Celeste, letting the water beat down on her face, then down her breasts and belly. She had turned off the nanoworms. She looked down at the soapy water gurgling out the drain and imagined the dead little worms or computers or whatever they were being carried out to sea.

But maybe that fabric had a use after all, she mused. You could bury tiny little lights in it, turn them on and off with a microchip. Yes. Moving little peep holes that flashed on and off. It would be sexy, eye-catching, intriguing, naughty. It would be, let’s face it, barely decent.

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